

Monthly Report from the Director



Scott R. Isaacks, FACHE
Medical Center Director

UPCOMING EVENTS

Labor Day
September 3

Veterans Service Fair
September 10, 10:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
Trident Technical College

Diversity Day Event
September 14, 10:00 a.m.
Ralph H. Johnson VAMC
Main Auditorium

Veteran Health Fair
September 25, 9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.
Trident VA Outpatient Clinic

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VA Medical Center

The Rest of the Story

Recently, I have included a new feature in my message based on journalist and radio personality Paul Harvey's "The Rest of the Story" to share all the facts – or correct inaccuracies – related to specific VA topics covered in the media. While these segments are most often related to our VA in Charleston, this month I want to share with you excerpts from an article titled [Unhealthy Skepticism](#) in the July/August 2018 edition of *Washington Monthly*, as well as comments from the new Secretary of Veterans Affairs The Honorable Robert L. Wilkie.

While our Charleston VA has not been the focus of national media, since 2014 VA has been the subject of numerous negative and often scandalous media stories beginning with the wait times story at Phoenix VAMC. The consistent barrage of scathing reports that all too often present only part of the story serves to destroy the trust that is critical to the patient/provider relationship in health care, minimize the quality care found at most VAs that equals or exceeds the private sector, and attempts to shame the highly competent professionals who work tirelessly to care for Veterans every day.

The truth is that the facts show that VA compares favorably overall to the private sector for providing high quality care. The Ralph H. Johnson VAMC – your 5 Star VA – continues to be a national leader, ranking in the top 10 percent of VA medical centers nationally for quality care according to VA's Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning (SAIL) for the past three years in a row. Our VA also continues to be ranked in the top 10th percentile in the Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set (HEDIS), an independent review of standardized measures across 90 percent of U.S. health plans and facilities in both the public and private sectors.

Let me be clear, there is always room for improvement at our VA, in our department, and in every health care system across the globe. Health care professionals are, and should be, held to the highest standards. That is why we must admit when things go wrong, have a solid plan that is followed to correct errors so they do not occur again, and do everything possible to improve our VA every day. But, as *Washington Monthly* points out, there is a different story about the VA that I believe the American people – and especially those we are charged with serving – need to know.

Washington Monthly reports in April 2018, The RAND Corporation, a highly-respected independent nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization committed to developing solutions to public policy challenges to make communities throughout the world safer and healthier, "found that the quality of VA care was generally better than private health care." The article also reports the RAND study is "just the latest of scores of studies that have come to the same conclusion for nearly two decades now." Read more about the [RAND study on VA health care](#).

"How can this be?" asked *Washington Monthly*. "How can we all know that the VA health system is a disaster, when study after study shows the opposite – that when it comes to actually providing care for nine million veterans, it outperforms the competition?"

Media reports routinely point out wait times for new appointments, the need to recruit more doctors to VA, Veteran suicide and homelessness, in their reporting of what they call substandard care provided at VA. But very few, if any are asking the question, "**Compared to what?**" as Secretary Wilkie pointed out at his first Employee Town Hall on August 9 and the *Washington Monthly* asked in their article.

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Washington Monthly states RAND research concluded “VA wait times for new patients are actually shorter than times found in studies of the private sector.” They also report that another study by Commonwealth Fund found one in four Americans receiving care in the private sector reported waiting six or more days for an appointment with their primary care physician even when they were sick or needed care. In June 2018, your Charleston VA’s average wait time for a primary care appointment was 2.05 days, according to [VA’s Access Audit](#). And we have completed 97 percent or greater of all appointments in less than 30 days for the past four years in a row.

When asked about VA’s vacancy rate, Secretary Wilkie also asked, “... criticized compared to what?” He pointed out that overall VA has about a nine percent vacancy rate compared to an average 15 to 20 percent vacancy rate in private sector health care. He also talked about the importance of recruiting specialists for the greatest needs of Veterans including women’s health and mental health, indicating the department will continue to focus heavily in expanding those areas. Here at our Charleston VA, we have a full complement of providers and health care professionals to meet the health care needs of the approximately 80,000 Veterans we are privileged to care for.

Washington Monthly reported more than 84 million Americans live in federally designated primary care shortage areas. The number of U.S. counties facing a severe shortage of practicing mental health professionals is also staggering – 77 percent of counties according to one study with 55 percent of counties having no mental health professionals at all. Now consider VA’s tele-mental health programs. Our VA is a pioneer in this area, establishing the first VA National Tele-mental Health Hub two years ago – the result of more than a decade of TMH research and treatment done right here – providing complex mental health care to Veterans as far away as Maine, West Virginia and Texas.

One Veteran suicide is one too many, and every Veteran on the street deserves a safe home and a future filled with possibilities. While the Veteran suicide rate remains steady at approximately 20 per day, it is important to note that 14 of those Veterans had not recently received care through VA. I am so thankful that VA stood up the Veterans Crisis Line, 1-800-273-TALK (8255) that has received 3.3 million calls and initiated 93,000 rescues since 2007. But we must continue our outreach efforts to bring even more Veterans into VA’s outstanding health systems, and continue such initiatives as suicide prevention screenings during each VA appointment to reduce suicide rates even more.

Additionally, our Charleston VA has an active suicide prevention program that not only intervenes for Veterans in crisis, but also trains community police departments and other first responders on de-escalating these situations. We also have a Homeless Program that features wrap-around services from housing to medical and mental health care to job placement, and active peer support to help Veterans get back on their feet.

The VA is not perfect – nor is any health care system. But it has been proven over and over to be as good as or better than any other health care system in the U.S. As Secretary Wilkie, the son of a gravely wounded Vietnam Veteran who received his care at VA, said, “This Department provides world class medical services. And it is stunning to me that that story has not been told to the American people ... “

So here, at your VA, we will continue to tell The Rest of the Story, both our good news and our challenges, with truth and transparency because our Veterans and stakeholders deserve to have all the facts as we partner together to continue providing the best care anywhere for our heroes.

Yours in Service,



Scott R. Isaacks

Director